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Remarks on the Lands Legacy Initiative

December 14, 1999

Thank you very much. Secretary Babbitt and George Frampton and all the members of our administration are glad to welcome the environmental leaders who are here today.

At the dawn of this century, Theodore Roosevelt defined America's great central task as "leaving this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us." This is the vision of environmental stewardship that has inspired our lands legacy initiative, the historic plan I unveiled earlier this year to protect America's threatened green and open spaces.

Two weeks ago I had the great honor of signing into law the funding for this lands legacy initiative. Although much of the news of that day concentrated on budget victories for education and public safety, it was also a remarkable day for the environment. With one stroke of the pen, we made it possible to add hundreds of thousands of acres to our children's endowment of natural wonders, places like New Mexico's Baca Ranch, home to one of North America's largest herds of wild elk.

Today, I will be sending to Congress a list of 18 additional natural and historic sites we propose to protect with new lands legacy funding. Our list includes sections of Hawaii's Hakalau Forest, which supports hundreds of species of rare plants and birds. It includes critical habitat on Florida's Pelican Island, where Theodore Roosevelt established the Nation's very first wildlife preserve. It includes the birth home and burial place of Martin Luther King, Jr.

We now have funding to protect all these places. We have willing sellers, and we look forward to speedy review by the appropriate committees in Congress.

I'm also pleased to report on the status of yet another effort to protect the lands we hold sacred. A year ago I asked Secretary Babbitt to report to me on unique and fragile places that deserve to be protected as na-

tional monuments. This morning, Secretary Babbitt presented me with his recommendation that I use my executive authority to create three new national monuments in Arizona and California and to significantly expand another in California. Each of the sites already belongs to the American people, and no land purchases would be required. But giving these lands national monument status would ensure they will be passed along to future generations, healthy and whole.

The first of the proposed new monuments is located on the northern rim of the Grand Canyon, and it consists of stunning canyons and lonely buttes shaped by the hand of God over millions of years. The second, a desert region in the shadow of rapidly expanding Phoenix, is an archaeological treasure trove containing some of the most extraordinary prehistoric ruins and petroglyphs in the American Southwest. The third, off the coast of California, would encompass thousands of small islands and reefs that serve as essential habitat for sea otters and sea birds forced from the shore by extensive development. Finally, this proposal calls for expanding California's Pinnacles National Monument, the site of the spectacular volcanic spires and mountain caves.

Secretary Babbitt's recommendations come as a result of careful analysis and extensive discussions with local citizen, State and local officials, and with Members of Congress. And I will take them very seriously. I expect to make a decision on the sites early next year.

Like Theodore Roosevelt, I believe there are certain places humankind simply cannot improve upon, places whose beauty and interest no photograph could capture, places you simply have to see for yourself. We must use this time of unparalleled prosperity to ensure people will always be able to see these places as we see them today.

There is no greater gift we can offer to the new millennium than to protect these treasures for all Americans for all time.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:52 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

Remarks on Signing the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999

December 14, 1999

Thank you. Thank you, please be seated. At this moment, about all I can think of is Merry Christmas. [*Laughter*]

Senator Rockefeller, Senator Collins, Representative Cardin, thank you all for being here. And Senator Chafee, thank you for being here, and with you, the spirit of your father, for all his great work on this.

I want to say a special word of thanks to our mayor, Tony Williams, and his mom, Mrs. Virginia Williams. He has become America's exhibit A of the potential for foster care success. He is a good man, and she is a magnificent woman, and we thank them for being here. Thank you.

I thank Secretary Shalala and all of her staff, and I thank Alfred Perez and Kristi Jo Frazier and the other young people behind me, for whom they spoke. They spoke so well and so bravely and so frankly. What they have achieved in their own lives is truly heroic, and we should all be very grateful that they are determined to make that kind of difference in the lives of other young people.

I want to thank the groups that have done so much to champion the cause of foster children, the Child Welfare League of America, the Children's Defense Fund, the Annie Casey Foundation, the Casey Family Program. I want to thank especially—I won't mention them, but they know who they are—the people who have come up to me personally and lobbied me on this issue over the last couple of years. [*Laughter*]

I've got a cousin that's been a friend of mine over 50 years, all my life; we were little kids together. She runs a public housing program in the little town in Arkansas where we were born. And she came up here to a HUD conference on kids aging out of foster care, and she spent the night with me at the White House. I got up the next morning—I never know, you know, what's on her mind—this is about a year ago. And she said, "Bill, you have got to do something about these kids that are aging out of foster care." She said, "It's a huge problem in New York and California, but believe it or not, it's a problem at home, too. And nobody's doing

anything about it." I want to thank all those people, and they know who they are.

And most of all, I want to thank Hillary. When we were in law school, she worked at the Yale Child Studies Center. Her first job was with what became the Children's Defense Fund. When I became Governor, in my first term she founded the Arkansas Advocates for Families and Children. She has always cared more about the welfare of all of our children than anything else and our mutual responsibilities to them. And she challenged us a long time ago not to forget those foster children who leave the system each year with no financial or emotional support, no one to turn to. She put a lot of herself into getting this bill passed.

Hillary likes to quote the Chilean poet and teacher Gabriela Mistral about our responsibility to children: "Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are formed, his mind is developed. To him, we cannot say 'tomorrow.' His name is 'today.'"

We are here today because all of you, and especially the Members of Congress from both parties, stood as one to say that America's foster children can finally have the name "today."

The Foster Care Independence Act expands access to health care, education, housing, and counseling for young people who must leave foster care when they turn 18. For the very first time, States will be able to pay housing costs and health insurance for people under 21.

The bill also gives States more resources and flexibility to help former foster children finish high school and go on to college, to help young people get jobs and vocational training, to provide counseling for young people learning to live on their own—you've already heard how important that is—and above all, to make sure young adults leaving foster care know they are not out there alone.

The bill makes \$700 million available to the States over 5 years under very flexible conditions. I challenge the States to use every penny of it, and I know I can depend upon the advocates here—[*laughter*—to make sure they do.

You also have to help the States, though, to design good programs, to implement them